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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000620

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, MARCH 10 - MARCH 23, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

- NGO's Criticize Fight Against Extremism and Terrorism
- No Alliance with Aliyev
- Complaints, Protests Regarding Unfinished Construction
- Disabled Protecting Their Office
- Protest Against Ban on Demonstrations

NGO's Criticize Fight Against Extremism and Terrorism

¶2. International Human Rights Bureau head Yevgeniy Zhovtis and Almaty Helsinki Committee president Ninel Fokina held a joint press conference in Almaty on March 19 to express their concerns over the government's tactics in fighting extremism and terrorism. Fokina claimed that the Committee on National Security (KNB), Procurator General's Office (PGO), and Interior Ministry are using the fight as a pretext to expand their control over civil society. There is an effort, she maintained, to persuade the public that mere affiliation with a religious group can be a threat to national security.

¶3. Zhovtis and Fokina alleged that there were serious violations of both Kazakhstani legislation and international legal principles in two recent trials of alleged terrorists and extremists. On February 25, 2008, a Shymkent court sentenced 14 Kazakhstani citizens to prison terms ranging from 14 to 19 years on charges of organizing a terrorist group, promoting terrorism, and planning terrorist acts against the KNB. On December 27, 2007, a Karaganda court sentenced 29 Kazakhstanis to prison terms ranging from 5 to 7 years for inciting social, national and religious hatred and for participating in the activities of the banned Hizb ut Tahrir group. Zhovtis and Fokina explained that both these trials were held in camera, with neither the defendants' relatives, nor the media, nor NGO's permitted to be in attendance. In the Karaganda case, even the defendants themselves were not present when the verdict was handed down.

¶4. Several relatives of those convicted in the Shymkent trial attended the press conference and briefed journalists about details of the case. The relatives alleged that key physical evidence, including weapons, computer discs, and leaflets, were planted by the KNB. They maintained that none of the defendants admitted guilt as they had done nothing wrong. Aysara Sugirova, wife of defendant Dastanbek Sugirov, claimed that the KNB selected the defendants largely because of their appearance: most of them had short beards and wore short pants. Her husband, she insisted, was merely a peddler of Islamic literature.

¶5. Fokina said that over the past few years, there has been a

significant increase in criminal cases for religiously-motivated extremism and terrorism. Zhovtis argued that "preventative measures" taken by law enforcement against individuals who are not truly engaged in terrorist activities -- who may be doing nothing more than passing out leaflets -- can actually further radicalize such persons.

No Alliance with Aliyev

¶6. Panorama weekly reported on March 21 that at a meeting of the AytPark discussion club, Azat (formerly True Ak Zhol) leader Bulat Abilov claimed that Rakhat Aliyev had tried to communicate with his party through "middlemen," who had even offered financial assistance. Abilov, however, ruled out any kind of cooperation or alliance between the Kazakhstani opposition and Aliyev.

Complaints, Protests Regarding Unfinished Construction

¶7. The co-owners of two multi-family residential buildings in Almaty organized a press briefing on March 17. They told journalists that the KazStroy construction company began constructing their residences in 2004. By 2007, one was 90 per cent finished and the other one lacked only linkages to utilities. However, the co-owners contended that as of 2008, KazStroy is moribund, and the company's management has run off without finishing their homes. The Almaty city administration has failed to come to their assistance.

¶8. On March 18, approximately 30 Almaty residents who had made down-payments for new apartments held a protest rally against the

ASTANA 00000620 002 OF 002

construction companies that took their money, but failed to follow through on the construction work. The protesters held up placards with slogans including "Provide Our Children with Roofs", "Construction Companies Must Be Held Accountable", and "Kazakhstan - For the People." According to the demonstrators, the local authorities have not responded to their complaints. They have now addressed an appeal to President Nazarbayev, on whom they are pinning their final hopes.

Disabled Protecting Their Office

¶9. On March 12, a group of disabled people from the Bibi-Ana association picketed outside an Almaty municipal court building to attract the public's attention to efforts to evict their organization from its premises. Former Almaty mayor Viktor Khrapunov sold the building in which Bibi-Ana has its offices several years ago. The new owners want the organization out of this space. Current Almaty mayor Imangali Tasmagambetov promised to resolve the issue, but has not come through. The case is now being heard by the municipal court.

Protest Against Ban on Demonstrations

¶10. On March 7, Almaty resident Olga Urazbekova held a one-woman protest on Republic Square to draw attention to the government's ban on demonstrations at this central Almaty site. She held up a poster with the slogan "Kazakhstan is a Police State." Urazbekova was arrested and taken to a local police station, but was released shortly thereafter.

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